

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE TEACHING CONTINUITY PLANS TO MOVE CLASSROOMS ONLINE AT COVID-19 ERA IN NIGERIA

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IMPROVING STUDENTS MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL- BEING IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Fear, worry and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times when faced with uncertainty or the unknown. It is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is on improving student's mental health and psychological well-being in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the concept of mental health, mental health promotion and protection were considered. Also, the concept of psychological wellbeing, preventive/control measures of COVID-19 virus, ways to improve student's mental health and psychological well-being during COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining mental health while social distancing, managing mental health and psychological well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. It was suggested among others that Federal and State government of Nigeria should create opportunity for teachers and lecturers to explore low cost technologies for dissemination of educational information in schools. Also, students should take time to relax and focus on the present as this can help them deal with feelings of anxiety

Keywords: mental health, psychological well-being, social distancing, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) started spreading in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Hubei province). The most typical symptoms of the disease are fever, fatigue, and dry cough. Other referred symptoms are chills, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea (Chen, N., Zhou, M., Dong, X., Qu, J., Gong, F., Han, Y., et al 2020). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), about 80% of infected people easily recover from COVID-19, without the need of any specific treatment. However, about 1 out of 6 cases of infection courses with severe pneumonia (Bermejo-Martin, J. F., Almansa, R., Menendez, R., Mendez, R., Kelvin, D. J. and Torres, A. 2020), which can lead to

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respiratory failure, cardiac injury, acute respiratory distress syndrome and death (Holshue, 2020). COVID-19 virus spreads from person to person via virus-laden respiratory droplets produced when an infected person talks, coughs, exhales or sneezes. These droplets can be inhaled by the people nearby, and/or fall over objects and surfaces, which another person can touch, and then touch their nose, eyes or mouth and get infected (WHO, 2020). Fear, worry and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times when we are faced with uncertainty or the unknown. It is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Added to the fear of contracting the virus in a pandemic such as COVID-19 are the significant changes to our daily lives as our movements are restricted in support of efforts to contain and slow down the spread of the virus.

Faced with new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, it is important that we look after our mental, as well as our physical health (WHO 2020). With the global development of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, the psychological issues which accompany this pandemic have rapidly compounded its public health burden (Torales, Higgins, Castaldelli-maia & Ventriglio 2020). The issue facing everyone is how to manage and react to the stressful situation unfolding so rapidly in the lives of people and in the communities. World Health Organisation (WHO) takes the impact of the crisis on people's mental health very seriously and is monitoring the situation with national authorities, while providing information and guidance to governments and the public. With the disruptive effects of COVID-19 – including social distancing-currently dominating our daily lives, it is important to check on each other, call, video-chat, be mindful of and be sensitive to the unique mental health needs of those around.

As the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts and brings significant stress to everyone's day-to-day lives, it may also exacerbate existing mental health conditions among young people, many of whom have had to scramble to return home or find housing after sudden campus closings that require adapting to distance learning technologies and settings. This is a tough transition for students.

Concept of Mental Health

Mental health is an integral and essential component of health. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes one's own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to the community (WHO, 2020). Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as

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humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life. On this basis, the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be regarded as a vital concern of individuals, communities and societies throughout the world especially during the outbreak of COVID-19. Mental health is the level of psychological well-being or an absence of mental illness. It is the state of someone who is “functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioural adjustment (Princeton University, 2014).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health includes “subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, inter-generational dependence and self-actualization of one’s intellectual and emotional potential, among others (WHO, 2001).

Mental Health Promotion and Protection

Mental health promotion involves actions that improve psychological well-being. This may involve creating an environment that supports mental health. An environment that respects and protects basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights is fundamental to mental health. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights, it is difficult to maintain a high level of mental health. Mental health promotion should be mainstreamed into governmental and non-governmental policies and programme (WHO, 2020). In addition to the health sector, it is essential to involve the education, labour, justice, transport, environment, housing and welfare sectors.

Concept of Psychological Well Being

Well-being is the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity. It includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and ability to manage stress. Psychological well-being is usually conceptualized as some combination of positive affective states such as happiness and functioning with optimal effectiveness in individual and social life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Further, psychological well-being refers to the extent to which people feel that they have meaningful control over their life and their activities. Nevertheless, psychological well-being problems have become increasingly common among students especially during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the causative factors associated to distress among students are uncertainty about their future employability and success, academic stress, being distant from their primary source of support (Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams & Glazebrook, 2013; Sarokhani, Delpisheh, Veisani, Sarokhani, Manesh, & Sayehmiri, 2013). Psychological well-being is about lives going well. It is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Psychological well-being consists of positive relationships with others, personal mastery, autonomy, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life, and personal growth and development.

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Psychological well-being is attained by achieving a state of balance affected by both challenging and rewarding life events (Dodge, Rachel, Daly, Annette, Huyton, Jan, Sanders, & Lalage 2012). Stress disturbs sleeping and eating patterns, lower motivation, and changes in use of alcohol or other drugs. The ceaseless news coverage and constant social media driven flood of messages can increase students' sense of anxiety during the outbreak of COVID-19 as these students are isolated from engaging in their usual activities. The COVID-19 pandemic is indeed stressful and causes many people to feel isolated, scared, and confused and this same impact might be on students as this has procured an impedance on the educational system and calendar. However everyday interactions and adequate guidelines to support others can transform the well-being of students and others around as the available resources to keep furthering the educational system is provided at all levels.

Preventive/Control Measures of Covid-19 Virus

No vaccine has been discovered for preventing COVID-19 virus. The best prevention is to avoid being exposed to it (Wang, Tang, & Wei 2020). Airborne precautions and other protective measures that may reduce the risk of exposure to the virus have been proposed. They include:

- i. Compulsory use of face masks
- ii. Ban of national and international travels
- iii. Regular washing of hand with soap or disinfect with alcohol-based sanitizer
- iv. Covering coughs and sneezes with tissue
- v. Physical and social distancing
- vi. Prohibition of educational, social, religious and political gathering
- vii. Imposition of curfews

Improving Student Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being During COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 outbreak is indeed an unprecedented time for everyone, especially students who face an enormous disruption in their lives. Students are likely to be experiencing worry, anxiety and fear, and this can include the types of fears that are very similar to those experienced by adults, such as fear of dying, fear of their relative dying, or fear of what it means to receive medical treatment. If schools have closed as part of necessary measures, then children may no longer have that sense of structure and stimulation that is provided by that environment, and now they have less opportunity to be with their friends and get that social support that is essential for good mental well-being.

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However, being at home could place some students at increased risk of, or increased exposure to, child protection incidents or make them witness interpersonal violence if their home is not a safe place; this is something that is very concerning (Kluge, 2020). Although students and youth are perceptive to change, some students may find the change that has taken place difficult to understand, and both students and youths may express irritability and anger. Students would want to be closer to their parents, make more demands on them, and, in turn, some parents may be under undue pressure themselves. Some strategies that can address this include; giving students the love and attention that they need to resolve their fears, and being honest with them, explaining what is happening in a way that they can understand, even if they are young. Mental health and psychological support services should be in place, and student's protection services need to adapt to ensure that the care is still available for the children or families who need it (Kluge, 2020).

Till date there is no proven treatment to manage the Novel corona virus disease. As the rate of spread is increasing day by day, lockdown is the only option available to slow down the rate of spreading the infection. In this process, all the education institutes were also locked down all of sudden. The students were in different phases of their academic year like some are about to complete the academic year, some are about to write their entrance examinations and some are writing their examinations. It is well known that the students experience lots of stress especially before and during the examinations (Singh, Goyal, & Tiwari 2012).

The psychological impacts for students can include anxiety and feeling stressed or angry. Its impacts could be particularly difficult for students who may be experiencing cognitive decline or dementia. Some students may already be socially isolated and experiencing loneliness which can worsen mental health. On a positive note, there are many things that student can initiate themselves or with the support of a career, if needed, to protect their mental health at this pandemic. Maintaining social connections is also important. Some students may be familiar with digital methods and others may need guidance on how to use them.

To maintain sound mental health during and after COVID-19 students should engage themselves in doing the following:

- i. **Create and Maintain Routine:** Students should maintain their usual sleep/wake schedule and engage in their normal morning routine (e.g., shower, coffee, meditate, exercise). They should limit time spent in bed to only what is necessary to obtain a restful night's sleep.
- ii. **Promote social Connectedness:** The need to remain physically distant does not have to mean a loss of social contact. Students are encouraged to nurture

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- their friendships and remain in communication with their classmates. Some avenues for strengthening social connectedness might include online study groups or online study/accountability partners (MacPhee, 2020).
- iii. **Talking about their Worries:** COVID-19 pandemic period is a difficult time for everyone and students sharing their feeling and the things they are doing to cope with families and friends could help them (PHE, 2020).
 - iv. **Manage Media and Information Intake:** 24-hour news and constant social media updates could make one more worried. As such managing media and information intake may help to check the news at set times or limit oneself to a couple of checks a day (PHE, 2020).
 - v. **Taking Time to Relax and Focus on the Present:** Relaxation techniques can help some people to deal with feelings of anxiety. Students should try to get outside once a day, or bring in nature: spending time in green spaces can benefit both mental and physical wellbeing. If they cannot go outside, they can try to get these positive effects by spending time with the windows open, or arranging space to sit and see a view (if possible) and get some natural sunlight.
 - vi. **Get the Facts:** Students should gather high-quality information that will help them to accurately determine their own or other people's risk of contracting coronavirus (COVID-19) so that they can take reasonable precautions.
 - vii. **Creating Purpose:** Living a life with meaning and purpose is key to improve one's psychological well-being. Creating purpose does not necessarily have to involve changing the world but finding a career devoted to helping others go through.
 - viii. **Eat well:** Students should be encouraged by their parents to eat nutritious food containing fibres fruits and vegetables. Food consumption should be minimized so as to avoid weight gain as students could be sedentary now unlike when they were in the school (Yen, Lo, Lee & Enrlquez, 2018). They should consume more of vitamins to boost their immune system, get enough sleep and exercise physically every day.
 - ix. **Engage in Social Activities and Sports:** Students should learn to make good use of musical instruments at their leisure time. They should also be encouraged to engage in physical exercise in the morning and evenings as this could help to tone up the muscles of the brain and reduce stress, depression and anxiety (Sanz, Sainz & Capilla, 2020).

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Maintaining Mental Health while Observing Social Distancing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Naturally, isolation from people could have negative effects, some involving mental health. Everyone will react differently to the stress of maintaining social distancing in response to the COVID-19 crisis; however typical reactions include;

- a. Decreased social interaction and increased loneliness
- b. Irregular daily schedule and limited motivation
- c. Inability to focus and lack of concentration
- d. Either increased or decreased appetite
- e. Impaired sleep, including both insomnia and hypersomnia, and fatigue/exhaustion.
- f. Increased feelings of:
 - i. Sadness and depression
 - ii. Uncertainty, fear, anxiety and nervousness
 - iii. Anger, irritability and frustration
 - iv. Boredom and numbness
 - v. Excess desire to use of alcohol and drugs.

It is important to remember that these feelings are normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Those who already struggle with symptoms of depression or anxiety may feel especially vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many factors that increase the likelihood that negative psychological consequences will occur in response to being quarantined. In a review of all studies examining the psychological effects of quarantine, Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely, Greenberg (2020) found evidence that the following factors increased the probability that negative psychological effects will occur:

- i. Longer duration of quarantine
- ii. Separation from loved ones
- iii. Fears of becoming infected yourself or infecting others
- iv. Experiencing frustration or boredom
- v. Inadequate food, water or other supplies
- vi. Not having access to adequate information
- vii. Financial strains or job loss

Ways to Manage Mental Health and Psychological Well-being During COVID-19

In the midst of managing a situation like the COVID-19 outbreak, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and worried. Focusing on how to slow the spread of the virus is important for our physical health, however, identifying ways to manage mental health is crucial (Hagadone, 2020). There may be experience on increased feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, impatience, irritability or frustration. People including students might also

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experience a sense of scarcity, or be concerned about increased stigmatization or xenophobia. People feel uncertain about the future or worry about isolation amidst rapidly changing schedules and social plans, while feeling worried is normal and expected, there are many ways students can increase resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hegadone, (2020) highlight these strategies to include;

- i. **Take breaks from the news:** After a certain point, it can be more upsetting than informational. Students should make sure the information they get is from a reputable and non-sensational source. They should evaluate the information that are helpful and aim to stick to that limit. During the covid-19 crisis it could be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Students should do some other activities they enjoy in order to return some normalcy back to their life as much as possible.
- ii. **Take Care of Your Body:** Take dep breaths, stretch, meditate. They should try to eat relatively well-balanced meals, move their body regularly, get enough of sleep and highly limit alcohol and drugs intake. This will help boost their immunity – and resilience.
- iii. **Plan for Coping with a Potentially Sudden drop in Social Contact** (e.g classes and events being cancelled): One of the most prominent ways individuals are asked to help mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic is to practice social distancing. This means remaining out of places where people meet or gather, and maintaining distance (approximately six fee or two meters) from others. students may also find some comfort by remembering that they are not alone, and that they should protect their health and well-being of their communities. Create new traditions for connecting regularly with friends, family and peers via messaging apps, etc.
- iv. **Establish adequate and safe communication between students,** while social distancing is practiced communication can be still be achieved between students and staffs through telephone etc. Communication is key for students so it must and should be achieved anywhere possible, by this it can assure safety and wellness of students.
- v. **Avoid what stirs up psychosomatic symptoms like stress,** limit if possible, stop all fear factors about COVID-19 as some has successfully recovered, withdraw yourself from the media if it scares you, avoid taking alcohol, drugs, caffeine or nicotine as all these will again lead to anxiety.

Conclusion

The impacts of COVID-19 have been felt in the entire world causing restriction of movement and other activities including schooling. Mental health is fundamental to our

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collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life. Some students may already be socially isolated and experiencing loneliness which can worsen mental health. On a positive note, there are many things that student can initiate themselves or with the support of a career, if needed, to protect their mental health at this pandemic. Focusing on how to slow the spread of the virus is important for our physical health, however, identifying ways to manage mental health is also crucial among students. to improve mental health and psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic students should create and maintain routine, promote social connectedness, talk about their worries, manage media and information intake, create purpose as well as engage in social activities among others.

Suggestions

The following suggestions were proffered in this chapter, they include:

1. Students who wish to go out should ensure that they use face mask.
2. Students should engage themselves in social activities as this will improve their psychological well-being.
3. Federal and state government should promote internal reflection on the renewal of teaching and learning model.
4. The government should create opportunity for teachers and lecturers to explore low cost technologies for dissemination of educational information in schools.
5. Students should take time to relax and focus on the present as this can help them deal with feelings of anxiety.

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